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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 007429

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SUBJECT: ALLEGED CENSORSHIP HIGHLIGHTS PRESS RESTRICTIONS,
CHALLENGES NEW, LIBERAL GOJ APPROACH

Classified By: Amb. Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (b) (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) The local press this week reported the alleged GOJ censorship of a political cartoon scheduled for publication in the weekly newspaper Al-Wahda. The government spokesperson denied that the GOJ censors at all, and some commentators are accusing the weekly's editor of trying to get the GOJ to shut down his publication to suit his own needs. While the actual events remain unclear, this case shows that censorship (or, more likely, enlightened self-censorship), remains a problem, and how the new government addresses it could be a test of its reformist intentions. The GOJ Spokesperson says she hopes to move to a completely judicial approach to complaints about press excesses, based solely on libel suits brought by injured parties, but admits that "the traditional ways" may die hard.
END SUMMARY.

CARTOON PULLING: WHO DONE IT?

12. (U) The staff of the weekly Al-Wahda claimed publicly on November 6 that a Jordanian security official asked that a political cartoon scheduled for publication in last week's edition be deleted, otherwise the issue would be seized. Press sources say the drawing showed a cabinet meeting with each cabinet member sitting under the flag of the country in which s/he studied (with two-thirds of the cabinet sitting under U.S. or UK flags). According to the popularly accepted version of the story, the weekly's editor, Mowaffaq Mahaddin, pulled the allegedly offending cartoon and started complaining about the "censorship" to anyone who would listen. He also later alleged that authorities had censored three editorials he recently wrote about the new government for another paper, Al-Arab Al-Yowm.

13. (SBU) Al-Dustour press, where Al-Wahda is printed, claimed to PAO staff that Mahaddin himself stopped the printing, and a common rumor alleges that Al-Wahda may be running out of money and is trying to provoke the GOJ into shutting it down, rather than admit business failure. There may be some truth to this as Al-Wahda, a political weekly of limited circulation and influence, was reportedly financed by the old Iraqi regime.

14. (U) Embassy contacts indicate that it is not uncommon for particularly biting cartoons to be refused publication -- although there is a difference of opinion on who is responsible. Many claim unnamed "security officials" as the culprits, while others blame weak-kneed editors. At least one famous Jordanian cartoonist publishes his work online, including those cartoons he cannot get printed in newspapers.

THE GOJ RESPONDS: WE WILL NOT CENSOR

15. (C) Government spokesperson Asma Khader (previously a prominent lawyer and human and women's rights activist) publicly denied that the GOJ had had a hand in stopping the publication of al-Wahda's cartoon, said that the new government opposes all forms of censorship, and announced a probe into the matter. In a November 12 meeting with the Ambassador and PolCouns (septel), Khader said she called Mahaddin and asked for his side of the story, claiming that he would not identify for her the alleged security official who had instructed him not to publish the cartoon. She mentioned that this editor has a history of complaining to the international press about censorship and pointed out that the same edition of Al-Wahda carried an article highly critical of the new government. Khader believes that Mahaddin probably acted on his own and tried to get some public relations mileage by manufacturing a controversy.

RULE OF LAW SHOULD BE THE RULE

16. (C) While not denying past GOJ attempts to manage the

content of the media, Khader said that the new government would not engage in censorship of individual press articles, even if offensive. She said that the GOJ wants individuals who feel injured by press stories to bring libel suits in courts to redress press excesses. One of her chief goals in her new position as spokesperson will be to encourage a gradual move toward complete freedom of the media. However, she said, "we can't be open for the publication of anything in just one day. It will take time to change the traditional ways of doing business."

COMMENT

17. (C) GOJ officials have, at least in the past, regularly made "suggestions" to editors to influence the content of publications. The editors often followed these suggestions, although they were not legally binding, and developed their own personal guidelines for self-censorship to avoid getting noticed in the future. This case provides a window on the problems the GOJ faces as it tries to open the political system and promote media freedom: new government ministers like Khader may have true intent, but implementation of their reforms will require real and sustained effort.

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